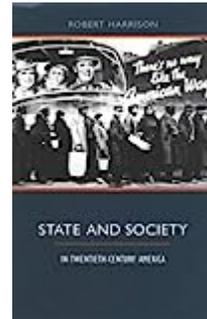


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Robert Harrison. *State and Society in Twentieth Century America.* London: Longman, 1997. Xi + 356 pp. \$75.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-27000-8.



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For half a century or more historians of modern America have debated the sources and consequences of liberal reform. More recently historians and social scientists have begun exploring the growth of the American state. Robert Harrison merges these two subjects in his ambitious *State and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. In Harrison's view, liberalism and the growth of the state are inextricably linked because liberal reformers have been the most important advocates of building a modern state. First during the Progressive Era and then in the New Deal, he argues, liberals pursued state-building in their search for "non-socialist solutions to problems of economic concentration, social injustice and class conflict" (p. 9). By drawing on both older and newer scholarship, Harrison seeks to explain what liberalism achieved and why it failed to achieve more. The modern state that liberals built, he argues, developed differently from those of Europe's industrial nations, and it developed less completely. Why, he asks, could liberals not achieve their larger aims? Why did the state remain underdeveloped?

Part of the answer, Harrison explains, was the heritage of the nineteenth century state. Drawing on the work of Morton Keller, Richard McCormick, Stephen Skowronek, Theda Skocpol, and Michael McGerr, Harrison describes the "courts and parties" state as one wed-

ded to the politics of distribution, intense partisanship, and a pervasive localism.[1] It was a system marked by the popular style of community-based politics and the broad allocation of public benefits such as Civil War pensions, river and harbor improvements, and patronage. But it was a system poorly suited to building national administrative capacities and one that moved only haltingly to address the problems created by a rapidly industrializing economy and the sources of social disorder during the 1890s.

The limited tradition of national state-building would prove a major obstacle to developing a modern state in the twentieth century. After 1900 a very different political order began to take shape, one marked increasingly by expertise, administrative government, systems of regulation, interest group conflict, and declining popular participation. The state that emerged was less developed than in Europe in part because neither labor nor the American left played an active role in shaping it. The drive for hierarchical systems of business control in the mass production industries produced bitter industrial conflict but only a modest expansion in union organization. Unionization was blunted by ethnic divisions within the new working class, legal and constitutional obstacles, and the furious opposition of industries backed by police power. Understandably, then, the AFL's

craft unions opted for a strategy of business unionism, voluntarism, and antistatism. As for the left, American radicals, most notably the Socialist Party, could not flourish in a political system that systematically marginalized third parties.

The impetus for liberal state-building came instead from the middle-class “progressive” reformers who created the “institutional arrangements which, in aggregate, constituted the basis for a new American state” (p. 85). In two chapters Harrison explores Progressive Era state-building. In the first he uses case studies of antitrust, railroad regulation, and the pure food and drug laws to understand the new political order that took shape after 1900. In the second, he examines the “extraordinary explosion of social reform activity” (p. 115) aimed at documenting poverty, attacking child labor, reshaping the urban environment, and providing mothers’ pensions. Throughout these discussions, he notes the conflicting motivations and the ambiguous results. The new ideas, policies, and institutions marked a distinct break from the nineteenth century but at the same time reformers failed to achieve national standards or to create European-style welfare states with their systems of social insurance. Harrison attributes these limitations and failures to legal obstacles, existing political structures such as the power wielded by state governments, and the lack of bureaucratic capacities at the national level. The efforts of women reformers to create a maternalist welfare state were bolder and in some ways more successful, he argues, but though the “brightest thread in social policy innovation of the Progressive Era,” these were “largely abortive” (p. 143).

Ignoring World War I (except for its impact on labor), Harrison moves from the Progressive Era to the 1920s. Building on the revisionist literature of the New Era, he insists that the period should not be dismissed as a reversion to *laissez-faire* conservatism. He stresses, however, that the boldest experiments in public policy—Prohibition and Herbert Hoover’s efforts to build a high-growth economy—failed because they did not embrace the kinds of state-building necessary to allow them to succeed. “Hoover’s project,” Harrison states, ... “was by no means an attempt to return to the spirit of untempered *laissez-faire* but rather to negotiate a new relationship between government and business appropriate to the new century. His was a thoroughly progressive vision” (p. 161). But Harrison also stresses that Hoover’s associative state, with its emphasis on voluntary cooperation and self-regulation, was riddled with contradictions, which become painfully apparent after 1929. His

anti-depression efforts— in many ways bold—failed because he would resort neither to legal compulsion when voluntarism had failed nor to public spending as a tool for achieving recovery and reform. “Hoover’s failure,” he says, “represented an end of the New Era project of negotiating a system of managed capitalism without building the apparatus of a modern state” (p. 178).

Harrison takes issue with Hoover and New Era revisionists who downplay the idea of a “watershed” in 1933. Roosevelt and the New Dealers, drawing on Progressive Era precedents, embarked on an unprecedented expansion of federal power. Still, as with progressivism, Harrison emphasizes what he sees as the New Deal’s contradictory results. New Deal farm policy, for instance, employed “radical intervention in the market” but did so “for essentially conservative purposes” (p. 191). The NRA helped stabilize a deteriorating economy and raised labor standards, but it embodied too many conflicting purposes to sustain economic recovery. Roosevelt’s conservative fiscal beliefs limited New Deal spending, and consequently: “Half-measures took the nation only half-way toward recovery” (p. 204).

In separate chapters, Harrison explores New Deal labor and social-welfare policies. In both cases he sees a similar pattern of important breaks with previous precedents and a bold expansion of the state’s role in society. In the case of labor, Harrison is more sympathetic to New Deal intentions and actions than are many recent writers. While acknowledging the role of grass-roots militancy and the importance of the CIO, he insists that labor’s “rise” owed more to New Deal labor law and its more supportive attitude toward unionization. As for social-welfare policies, he sees the efforts to meet the relief crisis of 1933 as a “pivotal moment in the expansion of federal power during the twentieth century” (p. 251). Yet Harrison also admits that Social Security and other measures very often yielded disappointing results, unfortunate or unintended consequences, and opportunities “only partly seized” (p. 267). The limitations of the Social Security Act were such that the “end product of the New Deal ... was a ‘semi-welfare state’” (p. 268).

In explaining the New Deal’s limitations, Harrison rejects the “corporate liberal” arguments put forth by scholars such as Colin Gordon, Stanley Vittoz, and Jill Quadagno that the Wagner and Social Security Acts were the work of enlightened capitalists and designed for the benefit corporate interests. Nor does he find persuasive the argument that New Deal measures were intended to coopt or quell militant insurgencies such as the

Townsend movement. Not corporate but reformist liberals hoping to liberate workers and the poor were the architects of the New Deal. Some of the New Deal's shortcomings were inflicted by "damaging concessions and compromises" (p. 214), divisions among the reformers, and the New Deal's (and especially Roosevelt's) fundamental conservatism. More serious, however, were the external barriers to reform, barriers such as the Supreme Court, the South's control of Congress, the power vested with state governments, the influence wielded by organized interests, and the limited bureaucratic capacities of the federal government. Faced with the formidable obstacles to state-building built into the American political structure, the New Deal, Harrison concludes, was more impressive for its successes than its failures. To some extent, moreover, it succeeded in changing these structures by loosening the control of white southerners on the Democratic Party, altering the Supreme Court, broadening the reach of administrative government, and forging the modern presidency.

In his final chapter, Harrison briefly sketches out the developments since World War II. After the war, the liberal-left social democratic tinge of the New Deal was abandoned for commercial Keynesianism and Cold War liberalism. Wedded to consensus, the postwar liberal settlement ran aground on the angry controversies of the 1960s. Triumphs such as civil rights cost the Democratic Party its white working- and middle-class constituencies. The Great Society, meanwhile, added to the political collapse because it rested not on powerful interest groups and mass voting blocs but rather on "a sense of moral obligation" about the poor and the powerless (p. 285). It was the work of a new class of intellectuals and activists who pushed liberalism in new directions. The result was political miscalculation and the erosion of liberalism's organizational base.

Based on extensive and careful reading, *State and Society* is an impressive synthesis of much recent scholarship. Historians familiar with the body of work on which Harrison draws will find little that is strikingly original but much that is thoughtful and perceptive. They will also find cogent discussions of complicated and contested issues throughout the book. As a study of the obstacles to liberal reform, the book is excellent. *State and Society* builds on contributions of Stephen Skowronek, Theda Skocpol, Ira Katznelson, and others to explain why progressivism and the New Deal achieved what William Leuchtenburg long ago described as a "halfway revolution."^[2]

As a study of the state-building impulses in modern America, however, it is less satisfactory. In keeping with the classic "liberal" histories of the 1950s and 1960s, Harrison sees state-building as a function of the modern presidency. But his insistence on linking state-building and liberal reform creates a seriously flawed analysis.

One problem is Harrison's limited focus. He concentrates on labor relations, social-welfare policies, attacks on business concentration, and civil rights. Such issues, of course, have been central to liberal reform, but they are hardly the sum of the American state-building experience. The Department of Agriculture, the Federal Reserve system, financial regulation, or the national security state—to give but a few examples—do not fit his model well, and, not surprisingly, receive little attention. Also largely absent is the role of scientific and social scientific expertise in fueling American state-building.

A related problem is his conception of the modern state. Early in *State and Society* he suggests that the state consists not just of agencies possessing formal authority but "a penumbra of institutions, ranging from political parties to foundations and think-tanks ..." Having said this, however, he then declares that "for analytical purposes" it is easier to think of the state simply in terms of "agencies entrusted with formal power" (p. 4). Defining the state in this way, however, distorts the American experience by limiting it primarily to efforts to expand the power of the public sector over the private. This ignores an important thrust of American state-building that has aimed to fuse the resources of the public and private sectors in order to build partnership or associational systems. Hardly limited to Hoover, this pattern of state-building was crucial to war mobilization, national security systems, social-welfare policy, and American agricultural policy.^[3] It can be understood only by admitting that foundations, think-tanks, and associational institutions are often as much a part of the "modern state" as any governmental agency.

Finally, any account of the growth of the state needs to pay more attention to the pervasive antistatism of American political culture. In his conclusion, Harrison suggests that United States has created "a sprawling monster of a state, virtually beyond the comprehension, never mind the control, of any one individual." It is a state, he rightly notes, without "an established administrative core" (p. 322) and one that is so fragmented and uncontrollable that it is no better suited to meeting the needs of the next century than the "courts and parties" state was for meeting those of the twentieth. But why has

this been the case? An important set of scholarly works by Ellis W. Hawley, Barry Karl, and James Morone suggest that the antistatist and anti-bureaucratic impulses of American society have been critical to creating America's modern state.[4] Harrison sees anti-statism as one of the constraints acting to check liberal designs. What he fails to see is that an important thread of liberal state-building has focused on creating non-statist alternatives to a highly centralized "modern" state. This search for alternatives has contributed to the contradictory, tortured, and ambiguous nature of the growth of the state in modern America, and it has produced the "sprawling monster" Harrison describes. We may understand this, however, only by moving beyond seeing the state as the work of the reform presidencies.

Notes:

[1]. The phrase "courts and parties" state is from Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Evolution of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[2]. William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 347.

[3]. See, for example, Paul A.C. Koistinen, *Planning War, Pursuing Peace: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1920-1939*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998); David E. Hamilton, *From New Deal to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933*. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University

of North Carolina Press, 1991); Robert D. Cuff, *The War Industries Board: Business-Government Relations During World War I*. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973); Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *From the Outside In: World War II and the American State*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, "The American Private Philanthropic Foundation and the Public Sphere, 1890-1930," *Minerva* 19 (1981), 236-70; Donald T. Critchlow, "Think Tanks, Antistatistism, and Democracy: the Nonpartisan Ideal and Policy Research in the United States, 1913-1987," in Michael J. Lacey and Mary O. Furner, eds. *The State and Social Investigation in Britain and America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[4]. Ellis W. Hawley, "The New Deal State and the Anti-Bureaucratic Tradition," in Robert Eden, ed. *The New Deal and Its Legacy: Critique and Reappraisal*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 77-92; Barry Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*. (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

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